

# **Whither ACE? A critique of the Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-2015<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This article provides a critique of the Tertiary Education Strategy for 2010 to 2015 as it affects adult learners in general, and learners and practitioners in adult and community education (ACE) in particular.

It identifies a number of positive features of the document; however it focuses mainly on its limitations. These include the lack of recognition of organisations such as the WEAs, the apparent lack of appreciation of the potential benefits and breadth of scope of ACE, its apparently limited understanding of adult learners and their learning, including their achievements in ACE programmes and in formal tertiary studies, and its apparent failure to recognise that the contributions of tertiary education institutions should go beyond the constraints of credentialing and include ACE programmes which are credential-free.

The article argues that several of these limitations are likely to reduce the probability of achieving the objectives set out in the document, and the paper concludes with some key recommendations.

## **Introduction**

This article provides a critique of the Tertiary Education Strategy for the period 2010-2015 (Office of the Minister for Tertiary Education, 2009b). It is written from the perspective of someone committed to adult learning and community education in all its forms and draws on a wide body of research.

This is the third Tertiary Education Strategy document and is the first to be developed under the National-led government which was elected in November 2008. The first two Strategy documents were developed under Labour-led governments. The first was for the period 2002-2007 (Office of the Associate Minister of Education (Tertiary Education), 2002) and the second covered the period 2007-2012 (Office of the Minister for Tertiary Education, 2006).

The special focus of this article, which is based closely on my submission in response to the draft strategy (Office of the Minister for Tertiary Education, 2009a), is on the effects of the new strategy on adult learners and particularly on adult and community education.

## **Positive features of the document**

From this perspective the document contains several positive features. It notes that the government places a high priority on learners (including literacy, language and numeracy learners) who have not been well served in their earlier schooling, as well as

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giving priority to those forms of ACE which ‘contribute to the overall cohesiveness of the community’.

The document refers to the need to improve the quality of teaching and learning for ‘second-chance learners’ in order to raise completion rates. It also mentions the role of ‘informal education provided by the adult and community education sector’ as well as ‘lower-level tertiary study’ in providing an avenue or pathway back into formal education.

It states that government will:

- ‘reduce the proliferation of provider qualifications .. [and] prioritise qualifications that link strongly to higher-level learning and skilled employment,
- ‘continue to work with providers to embed literacy, language and numeracy in level one to three qualifications .. [and] continue to support intensive literacy programmes in workplaces,
- ‘expect adult and community education providers to focus on second chance and foundation learners, including a higher proportion of Māori, Pasifika and speakers of languages other than English.’ (p 8)

Other positive features of the document are the inclusiveness of its vision and its recognition of the importance of assisting more Māori and Pasifika people to achieve especially at higher levels, encouraging more young people to engage in tertiary education, and assisting more adult learners to gain the literacy, language and numeracy skills for higher level study or skilled employment.

## **Limitations of the document**

From the perspective referred to earlier, however, the document also has a number of major limitations or negative features. As I see it, these limitations may arise out of a lack of familiarity with the research, practice and provision of adult learning and education in general and adult and community education in particular. In any case, one consequence of these limitations is that the government’s own objectives are unlikely be achieved. They include the following.

### **1 Lack of recognition of OTEPs**

Firstly, OTEPs, or Other Tertiary Education Providers recognised under Section 321 of the Education Act 1989, are referred to only very briefly in the document in the context of a sentence describing the various types of tertiary education organisations (p 11). There is no other reference to them so that one is left wondering what if any role they are expected to play in the wider strategy. This lack of recognition seems extraordinary since several of these community organisations including such organisations as the WEAs currently make significant and unique contributions to tertiary education and in particular to adult and community education. It is even more extraordinary if it is recognised that many of these contributions by the WEAs are closely aligned with the government’s own stated priorities and equity concerns.

### **2 Limited appreciation of the potential benefits and breadth of scope of ACE**

Secondly, the document fails to identify or recognise sufficiently clearly the wide range of benefits of ACE and the potential breadth of scope of the contributions of ACE providers. The following were the national priorities for ACE as set out in the previous tertiary education strategy for 2007-2012]:

- ‘targeting learners whose initial learning was not successful
- raising foundation skills
- encouraging lifelong learning
- strengthening communities by meeting identified community needs
- strengthening social cohesion.’

These priorities were seen as representing ‘the distinctive contribution of the adult and community education sector.’ (Office of the Minister for Tertiary Education, 2006: 17) For this strategy document the statement of priorities for ACE providers is very much narrower. It states that the government expects ACE providers to:

- ‘engage learners who have not been well served by education in the past
- ‘increase literacy, language and numeracy skills for individuals and whānau
- ‘contribute to the overall cohesiveness of the community.’ (p 13)

Although there is some clarification of the wording, two of the previous priorities - ‘encouraging lifelong learning’ and ‘strengthening communities by meeting identified community needs’ - have been dropped.

As indicated earlier, it is encouraging to note that the government places a high priority on learners (including literacy, language and numeracy learners) who have not been well served in their previous schooling, as well as giving priority to those forms of ACE which contribute to the overall cohesiveness of the community. On the other hand, any narrowing of the ‘curriculum’ and the apparent lack of recognition of the value of the diverse benefits of ACE provision is likely to have unfortunate consequences.

There is growing research evidence which points to the considerable benefits to be gained from broadening rather than narrowing the scope of ACE. This research on the benefits of adult learning and education is reported on and reviewed in a variety of publications (Aldridge & Lavender, 2000; Benseman, Sutton, & Lander, 2005; Benseman & Tobias, 2003; Bowman, 2006; Clemans, Hartley, & Macrae, 2003; L. Feinstein, & Hammond, C., 2004; L. Feinstein, Hammond, Woods, Preston, & Bynner, 2003; Hammond, 2005; McGivney, 2002; Narushima, 2008; Preston & Green, 2003; Preston & Hammond, 2002; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2008; Tom Schuller, Brassett-Grundy, Green, Hammond, & Preston, 2002; Tom Schuller, Hammond, Brassett-Grundy, Preston, & Bynner, 2004; Walstab, Volkoff, & Teese, 2006).

These benefits, which are even more important in difficult economic times than in times of full-employment, include the following: social & cultural benefits (including family & community benefits), educational (including inter-generational) benefits, health (including public health and disease prevention) benefits, benefits in relation to crime prevention and reduction (including the rehabilitation of offenders), economic benefits (including employment creation) and political benefits (including those of

active citizenship and participation and the strengthening democratic institutions).

These benefits, some of which are explicit, direct and planned while others are implicit, indirect and secondary, derive from a wide range of programmes and activities. These include literacy, language, numeracy and other foundation programmes but they also include many other programmes some of which may be labelled as ‘hobby and personal interest classes’.

### **3 Limited understandings of adult learners and their learning**

Thirdly, the document betrays limited understanding of the nature of adult learning and of the needs and interests of the learners with whom the government expects ACE providers to engage. As a consequence the strategy as drafted here is unlikely to succeed in meeting the government’s own objectives.

There is, as we have seen, a focus on targeting certain categories of learners and potential learners. Some levels of targeting of resources may indeed be necessary. However, as mentioned in the previous section, the evidence suggests that there are real dangers in relying on targeting population groups on the basis of alleged deficits which all-too-readily become self-fulfilling prophesies. There is a substantial body of research (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Boshier & Collins, 1984; Entwistle, 1983; Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996; Hall, 2005; Houle, 1961; Illeris, 2002; Kennedy, 2002; Marton, 1976; Messick, 1976; Reybold, 2002; Shipman, 1985; Smith & Spurling, 2001; Squires, 1981; Tennant, 1997; Tobias, 1997; 2004; Walter, du Bois-Reymond, & Biggart, 2006; Witkin, 1977) which highlights the fact that people’s learning motivations, interests, ways of knowing and approaches to different kinds of learning as well as their perceptions of themselves as learners are all too varied and contextual to conform readily with any simple stereotypes or models of provision determined at a national level or by other authorities. People develop their own learning priorities which do not always fit with priorities ascribed to them by external authorities. Moreover people’s interests, attitudes and perceptions change in the course of participating in programmes, making it problematic to define in advance satisfactory performance levels or even course completion rates.

Special literacy, numeracy and foundation classes of various kinds are badly needed if ‘second chance’ or even ‘first chance’ adults are to achieve their goals (John Benseman & Tobias, 2003). But these will never be enough. Researchers and practitioners have long since recognised that there are many different literacies and that a range of approaches including a diversity of content and themes is essential even to achieve the limited goal of promoting ‘literacy, numeracy or foundation skills’ (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett, 2001; Hamilton, 2006; Kalantzis, Varnava-Sloura, & Cope, 2002; Martin-Jones & Jones, 2001).

### **4 Limited recognition of achievements of older adults in tertiary education**

Fourthly, with regard to formal studies, it seems that the achievements of adults may be underestimated in the document which contains little acknowledgement of the relatively high levels of achievement of adults over 25 or 30 who return to formal studies.

The government wants to have more young people engaged in tertiary education. This is well and good. However, the document goes on to compare older and younger students. It is argued that ‘those who enrol in tertiary education directly from school

are more likely to complete a qualification than students who enter from the workforce or unemployment ... Targeting young people can therefore improve the return on public funding.’ The evidence on this is however not convincing. There is in fact considerable evidence to suggest that adults over the age of 30 who return to study are likely to perform almost as effectively (and with some academic support and training) even more effectively than their younger counterparts straight from school.

## **5 Limited recognition of the potential scope and contributions of tertiary institutions**

Fifthly, in my opinion, the view of tertiary education reflected in the draft strategy is a limited one. It is based on an understanding of tertiary education which is almost entirely dominated by its credentialing and labour market functions. It assumes that almost all forms of state-funded tertiary education can and should be based on a qualifications framework which reflects a hierarchy of knowledge and skills.

Clearly these credentialing and labour market functions of tertiary institutions are extremely important. The vast bulk of resources are devoted to programmes which provide the knowledge and skills required in the labour market and which lead to certificates, diplomas and degrees. However other forms of tertiary education which are free from the constraints of credentialing are also extremely important. With this in mind I want to suggest some significant modifications to the institutional descriptions and priorities contained in the document.

### **(a) Universities**

The document states that universities have three core roles: to undertake research that adds to the store of knowledge; to provide a wide range of research-led degree and post-graduate education that is of an international standard, and to act as sources of critical thinking and intellectual talent.

In general I endorse this. However I think the statement could be strengthened by rewording (a) the second role as follows ‘to provide a wide range of research-led degree, postgraduate **and adult** education’, and (b) the third role as follows ‘to act as sources of **critical and creative** thinking and intellectual talent’.

With reference to expectations I think that this too could be strengthened by the inclusion of the words highlighted below.

‘The Government expects universities to:

- enable a wide range of students to successfully complete degree and post-graduate qualifications **and to enable a wide range of adults to take part effectively in ACE programmes which draw on universities’ strengths**
- undertake internationally recognised original research
- create and share new knowledge that contributes to New Zealand’s economic, **cultural** and social development, and environmental management.’ (p 10)

### **(b) Polytechnics**

The document states that Polytechnics have three core roles:

- to deliver vocational education that provides skills for employment
- to undertake applied research to support vocational learning

- to assist progression to higher levels of learning or work through foundation education.

The document states that government expects polytechnics to:

- enable a wide range of students to complete industry-relevant certificate and diploma qualifications
- enable local access to tertiary education
- support students with low literacy, language, and numeracy skills to improve these skills and progress to higher levels of learning
- work with industry to ensure that vocational learning meets industry needs.

This description and these priorities for polytechnics are extremely limited. They focus almost exclusively on education and training for the labour market with little recognition of the important potential role of polytechnics in relation to ACE. Thus at the very least I would like to see the second expectation strengthened by the inclusion of the phrase highlighted below.

- ‘Enable local access to tertiary education **and enable a wide range of adults to take part effectively in ACE programmes which draw on polytechnics’ strengths.**’

#### **(c) Wānanga**

I would like to see the roles and expectations of wānanga include a more specific commitment to promoting community learning. This is contained in the core roles. However it could be strengthened there and I would certainly want the government’s expectations in this area to be strengthened.

#### **(d) Industry training organisations**

More attention needs to be given to this statement of roles and expectations. In particular I would like to see the expectations stated more broadly to include the education and training of working New Zealanders which would go beyond that which is qualification-driven. It should include the promotion of nonformal and informal education and training.

### **Conclusion and Summary of Recommendations**

As I hope will have become apparent in the above paragraphs, I believe that in these times of economic difficulty there are good reasons to incorporate a new approach to ACE and its funding in the TES for 2010-2015.

1 **Broad approach needed which would recognise the wide range of social benefits of adult and community education.** This new approach would, however, not be narrower and more restrictive than in the past, but would instead be broader. It would recognise and make explicit the diverse contributions and potential contributions of OTEPs such as the WEAs to ACE and to tertiary education generally. It would also recognise and make explicit the contributions and potential contributions of schools, REAPs, universities, polytechnics, wānanga and ITOs to ACE and to tertiary education generally.

2 **New priorities should be added** The new approach would entail the addition of new priorities. These would include not only the five priority areas

contained in the previous tertiary strategy but would add new priorities in some of the areas referred to above in the discussion of the wider benefits of ACE in 3.2 above.

**3 Priority should continue to be given to those not well served by previous schooling** Following the lead of the draft TES document the new approach would continue to place a high priority on learners (including literacy, language and numeracy learners) who have not been well served in the past. It would do so however by seeking to embed literacy, language and numeracy learning within a diverse range of ACE programmes and activities designed to meet the diverse needs and interests of people in a wide range of contexts and situations.

**4 Diversity and changing nature of people's needs and interests should be accommodated** The new approach would celebrate the diversity of people's motivations, interests and approaches to different kinds of learning as well as their perceptions of themselves as learners. It would also recognise that people's interests, attitudes and perceptions can change as they participate in programmes making it problematic to define in advance satisfactory performance levels or even course completion rates.

**5 Recommendations** In the light of this I recommend that:

- (a) the level of ACE funding be restored to that which existed prior to the recently announced cuts to school funding for ACE and the projected ACE cuts to tertiary institutions, and
- (b) a new approach to ACE funding be set in place which would be based on a broad rather than narrow conception of the nature, purposes and potential benefits of ACE. This new approach would include the following:
  - statutory recognition of ACE in all its forms with special reference to the statutory protection of community learning initiatives;
  - at the level of the state closer co-ordination on ACE policy between the TEC and Ministry of Education; and
  - endorsement of a model of ACE provision based on minimal regulation by the state at the national level (subject to the requirements of overall policy direction and sound financial practices), and maximum levels of self-determination and self-regulation by communities of interest, recognised agencies & institutions, and local & regional networks

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